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The Origin and Development of Religion

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The minister of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis is guaranteed absolute freedom of thought and speech. The Sunday morning addresses are the expression of his individual convictions, and he alone is responsible for them.

This address is published because it deals fundamentally with the problems of religious origins, a knowledge of which is necessary if people are ever to be freed from the superstitions of popular religion. It is to be hoped that it will lead many people to Mr. Carpenter's book, which in turn will stimulate interest in the study of rational religion.

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The Origin and Development of Religion



A Platform Review of Mr. Edward Carpenter's "Pagan and Christian Creeds."

The subject of religious origins is a very fascinating one and one that has received much attention during the past generation. There have been more books written on this phase of religious thought than any other during the past few decades. In fact, the material has been so abundant that it has been difficult to come to any definite conclusions in the matter, and because of this mass of material and the newness of the study there has been a tendency to rush in too hastily with what seems a plausible theory, which for the time being has become the fashion. For instance, when the study of religious origins first began to be taken seriously great stress was laid upon sun gods. Every divinity in the world was said to be an impersonation of the sun or if feminine of the moon; Apollo was a sun god, of course; Hercules was a sun god; Samson was a sun god; Krishna and even Christ were sun gods. A little later the Phallic explanation of everything came into fashion. According to this the deities were all polite names for the origins and powers of procreation, and the rites and symbols of religion were all connected with the sex instinct. And then came the theory that the gods and goddesses had actually once been men and women—mystical characters around whom a halo of romance and remoteness had gathered. Still later a school has arisen which thinks little of the sun gods and Phallic worship and deified human beings, and pays more attention to earth and nature spirits, to gnomes and demons and sprites, and to the processes of magic by which these, it was sup-

posed, could be enlisted in men's service if friendly or cast out if hostile.

It is easy to see, of course, that there is some truth in all these explanations, but naturally each school for the time being has made the most of its own theory. Mr. J. M. Robertson, who has done such fine work in this field, relies chiefly on the solar and astronomical origins, though he does not altogether deny the others. Dr. J. G. Frazer, on the other hand, whose great work "The Golden Bough" is the most monumental collection of records of primitive customs in the world and will be an inexhaustible mine for all future students, is apparently very little concerned about the sun and stars but concentrates his attention on the collection of innumerable details of rites, chiefly magical, connected with food and vegetation. Still later writers like Reinach and Jane Harrison, being mainly occupied with customs of very primitive peoples, have confined themselves even more to magic and witchcraft.

A Splendid Summary.

And now comes Edward Carpenter with his new book called "Pagan and Christian Creeds: Their Origin and Meaning," gathering together all the evidence collected by these men and making a synthesis of it. Accepting the truth of all the various claims, he shows the part that each has contributed to the formation of the religious consciousness, and uses the material for the purpose of trying to account for this great and universal phenomenon of religion. The first thought that came to my mind after reading this book was the old story of the rustic who, anxious to magnify the talents of a certain public man, summed everything up in the expression: "He be a very clever fellow—he do always think as I think." If, like the ingenuous countryman, I applied the standard of self-measurement to another man I would say this work of Edward Carpenter's is one to which with few exceptions I would willingly have put my own name. In all my delving into the origins of religion I have never come across a single volume which comprises so much I agree with and so little I differ from, so startling an expression of the message you have heard from this platform during the

few years we have been associated together, as this book called "Pagan and Christian Creeds: Their Origin and Meaning," by Edward Carpenter.

It is not necessary for me to tell you who Edward Carpenter is, for he is well-known in the world of liberals, though perhaps a sentence or two in regard to him might not be out of place. He was born in Brighton, England, in 1844, and was educated at Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He relinquished orders and a Cambridge fellowship in 1874 to lecture on science and music, and later settled on a small farm near Sheffield, engaging in literary work, market-gardening and various forms of social propaganda. He visited the United States in 1884 to see Walt Whitman and in 1890 made a pilgrimage to Ceylon and Guiana. His books include among others the very well known ones "Towards Democracy," "Civilization: Its Cause and Cure," "The Healing of Nations," and "Towards Industrial Freedom." He is now universally recognized as one of the great prophets of modern democracy.

A Difficult Task.

As one naturally expects, the contents of his latest book with which we deal today are of that scholarly and philosophical nature which puts it beyond the reading powers of the man in the street, but considering the subject discussed it is exceedingly simple and there is very little which is not well within the reach of the earnest student; and for that reason I should rejoice to know that it found its way into the hands of every one who is accustomed to come here on Sunday mornings. While it deals with a subject which in itself is somewhat abstruse, it is the simplest and most readable treatment of this subject I have found anywhere. As the range is very wide, embracing the results of many sciences—anthropology and ethnology, mythology and history, theology and political economy, and various others—the contents are extremely varied, condensed and welded with great skill, logically derived from one fundamental fact and powerfully directed toward one clear and definite conclusion. I would therefore recommend the reader to select certain chapters for the first reading and reserve the others for a second which will be more effective after the mastery of those which are simpler because within the usual horizon. One should read those chapters which deal with his main theme first and then go back and read the chapters which contain the evidence for his conclusions. The chapters on "Symbolism of the Zodiac," "Ritual Dancing," "The Sex Taboo," for instance, might be omitted until the reader, having gone through the other chapters, turns back to the beginning for a second reading straight through to the end.

This volume is so important that it deserves the most careful and considerate study. People will never find their way out of the wilderness of superstition into the promised land of reason in religion until they have mastered the subject with which this book deals.

In spite of all this commendation you must not understand me to commit myself to everything the author affirms or supposes or considers proved, or advances cautiously and tentatively awaiting the discovery of further facts. The science of comparative religion is young, the possibilities of wider and deeper research are enormous and Mr. Carpenter eschews the role of dogmatist, for which he is finely unfitted both by nature and by fullness of knowledge. To his argument, however, he brings that touch of the mystic which is the guaranty of sympathy and the complete interpreter. What I mean is this: I accept absolutely the author's premise that all forms of religion have a common root in human consciousness, and his conclusion that all forms of religion are evolving toward a world religion as an acknowledged unity amid variety; and I believe that on the whole the facts and inferences which link the premise with the conclusion justify both of these immensely important propositions. My reading this morning from the book will have prepared your minds for his arguments, for the whole thesis is pretty well summed up in the section chosen for our morning lesson, which you will find at the beginning of the seventh chapter.

The Object of Religion.

It is impossible that a theme so noble should weary you but as my aim is to present the main lines only of a very learned volume comprising more than three hundred pages, you will understand that I have to pack much matter into small space and you will not blame me for things left unsaid and you will pardon me if at times I do not make the author's intention altogether clear.

The object of religion is defined by the author as being "to bring the whole human being into some intelligible relation with the physical, moral and natural order of the world and of human nature." Mr. Carpenter leaves to others the argument from material evolution which is a very valid one, he admits; and follows along the line of psychological evolution. He finds the root of religion in human consciousness, and as that consciousness is a unity the religion which comes from it must also be a unity; but although it be a unity it of course varies in form according to the stage of development reached in different parts of the earth and at different periods of time. Local conditions never changed the essence of the human

creed, but only colored its details and gave its ritual different dramatic settings. For instance, he says that one of the things proved is that from the earliest ages a great body of religious belief and ritual has come slowly down, differentiating itself into a great variety of forms but always embodying certain main ideas which became in time the accepted doctrines of the latter churches—the Indian, the Egyptian, the Mithrian, the Christian, and so forth. What these ideas in their general outline have been we can perhaps best judge from the Apostles' Creed with which you are perfectly familiar:

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into Hell; the Third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into Heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy Catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

A Common Source.

Here in this creed, says Mr. Carpenter, we have the all-father and creator, descending from the sky in the form of a spirit to impregnate the earthly virgin-mother who thus gives birth to a saviour hero. This saviour is slain by the powers of evil, is buried and descends into the lower world but arises again as a god into heaven and becomes the leader and judge of mankind. We have the confirmation of the church by means of a communion which binds together all the members, living or dead, and restores erring individuals through the sacrifice of the hero and the forgiveness of these sins; and we have the belief in the bodily resurrection and the continued life of the members within the body of the church, itself regarded as eternal. Now, says Mr. Carpenter, "one has only instead of the word 'Jesus' to read Dionysus, or Krishna, or Hercules, or Osiris, or Attis; and instead of 'Mary' to insert Semele, or Devaki, or Alcmene, or Nona; and for Pontius Pilate to use the name of any worldly tyrant who comes into the corresponding story, and lo! the creed fits in all particulars into the rites and worship of a pagan god." He continues: "I do not mean to say that all the religious beliefs of paganism are included and summarized in the Apostles' Creed, for some very important religious elements are there omitted; but all the beliefs which are summarized in this creed had already been fully represented and elaborately expressed in the non-christian relig-

ions and rituals of paganism." And this body of belief did not spring from any particular center far back and radiate thence over the rest of the world but the evidence shows that these beliefs were the spontaneous outgrowths of the human mind at certain stages of its evolution; that they appeared in the different races and peoples at different periods according to the degree of development and were largely independent of social intercourse, though of course influenced by it.

Now, when the mind takes hold of this simple unifying principle it never has any difficulty in separating the temporary from the universal and it gives a stronger foundation to faith and hope to know that religion has developed through the mental growth of the people ever going on to something better, than to believe that it came as a miraculous revelation which would never admit of repetition. The study of those early theogonies and superstitions, as we now regard them, has a value inasmuch as they show the stages through which the human mind has evolved and reveal an urge at the heart of humanity which unites the earliest and the latest ages in a common sympathy and an endless quest. So while the study of religion is largely a study of delusion, it is also a study of reality inasmuch as it is a study of the evolution of human consciousness.

The Three Stages.

It is important to take a firm grasp of Mr. Carpenter's initial proposition, namely: that the phenomenon of religion is a necessary accompaniment of—an infoldment along with—the human consciousness. That consciousness unfolds through three main stages—the stage of simple or animal consciousness, the stage of self consciousness, and the stage of universal consciousness. We might say, roughly, that the first was the age of superstition, the second is the age of selfishness and conflict through which we are now passing, while the third is the age of unity into which we hope mankind is about to enter. Of course, these stages overlap and merge into one another—the least developed parts of the human race still linger in the first stage, while others are entering on and still others coming to the end of the second stage; and many, or it may be only a few, are preparing to enter into the third stage of spiritual unity and racial fraternity and human solidarity.

In the next place we must trace religion clearly back through all the creeds and rituals to its roots in the one universal life. By the power of sympathetic imagination we must understand how the primitive man identified him-

self with nature and the world around him. He did not separate himself, he did not know how to separate himself from the great whole. He was one with the tribe. He was one with the animals and especially with the totem of his tribe. The outer world was a part of himself. Readers of the "Golden Bough" (and a noted scholar says that no man should presume to pass opinions on religion until he has read the seven large volumes of the "Golden Bough") should have no difficulty in comprehending that state of mind or absence of mind, if you choose to call it so. Religion has developed not by man's denial of his unity with the world but by his accepting and acknowledging that unity more profoundly. The large part played by Animism, as modern science calls it, must be allowed. As far back as we can go through those dim hundreds of thousands of years we can trace an always growing sense of life and intelligence and spirit, or spirits, in the world to which the human spirit felt itself related, and its feeling for which is expressed in those diverse rites and sacrifices and magic which make up the early history of religion. "It is," says Mr. Carpenter, "the consciousness of the world life burning, blazing deep down within us. It is the soul's intuition of its roots in omnipresence and Eternity." This main argument of the fundamental unity of man with nature runs through the whole book. It is constructive and I am grateful to Mr. Carpenter for this alone, for I have come to the conclusion that the roots of man's religion lie in this oneness with nature and I heartily welcome every statement of the case.

The Place of Fear.

That brings us to recognize the great part played by the emotion of fear in this evolution of religion, which says Mr. Carpenter, has stimulated the imagination to fantastic activity and lies at the base of the whole process by which gods and demons were created. Think of what this world was with its terrific unknown powers of snow, ice and heat, of winds and rains, of thunders and lightnings, of earthquakes and volcanoes, of darkness and shadows, of sounds and noises, of rustlings and echoes, of moons and stars, of comets and meteors—think, I say, of what a world so benign and appalling must have meant to the dawning consciousness of the first man, and you will understand. But the sense of fear would proceed to purify itself by merging into sensations of awe, wonder, reverence; and from these, prayers and propitiations and offerings, to avert the wrath or secure the favor of the terrible unknown powers. By and by knowledge began to grow and as knowledge grew ignorance, which is the mother of fear, began to recede, and confidence in the powers which ruled

this world began to glimmer in the mind of man—the first seeds of science and the first elements of that much misunderstood religious principle called faith which alone can banish fear.

It is impossible even to summarize the writer's account of the origin of sin (as the sense of selfish separation from the tribe and the world and his gods) and sacrifice and atonement, with their resulting rites of communion or community meal restoring fellowship with the tribe and the god; or his description of pagan initiations with their baptisms of blood or water, their butchered bulls and slain lambs, their ceremonies of rebirth or regeneration. All these existed from the remote ages long before Christianity, and often bore an astonishing resemblance to the doctrines and ceremonies of that religion, so much so that the Christian missionaries were reduced to the dire necessity of attributing their invention to the devil for the purpose of deceiving mankind.

Saviours and Gods.

Mounting higher still we come to an innumerable crowd of saviours created by the evolving spirit of humanity; saviours who spilt their blood for the salvation of man, all of them born of virgin mothers, some of them crucified and most of them rising from the dead, as celebrated by the principal feasts in the great religions. In India there was Krishna and Indra; in China there was Tien; in Egypt there was Horus and Osiris; in Persia, Mithras; in Palestine, Jesus; in Greece, Hercules, Dionysus and Prometheus; and the list might be made most any length. Mr. Carpenter tells that even in Mexico there was a saviour by the name of Quetzalcoatl who was born of a virgin, was tempted forty days, slain, and whose second coming was so eagerly looked for that when Cortez appeared "the Mexicans, poor things, greeted him as the returning god." The doctrine of the saviour is in fact world-wide and almost world-old. And what is the universal myth of the virgin mother but a theory of the kindly earth, the real virgin-mother, ever-young, renewing herself every spring, Mother Earth, as to this day we call her, who brings forth successive generations, nourishes them at her bountiful breast and takes them all back again into her bosom one by one in the beautiful sleep of death?

A stage higher yet and we come to the origin of gods who, in the sense of finished personalities dwelling apart from and beyond the earth, probably arrived late in the process of evolution, and were shaped after the model of the tribe's great men. In a sense they were projections

of the human mind, a magnification of the invisible animating powers of the natural world, or the spirits of departed ancestors; but always and inevitably anthropomorphic, that is, in human shape. The transcendental god came latest as an evolution from these other forms. This brings us up to the all absorbing question of God. I have scrupulously looked for Mr. Carpenter's own god, and it is here perhaps that we part company in an intellectual sense. In the course of his work he uses phrases such as these: "a self conscious life"; "some kind of super-consciousness"; "cosmic universal life"; "a universal being behind all phenomena"; "the great self of the universe"; from which I take it that Mr. Carpenter's god takes a theosophic rather than a theistic or humanistic form. I am not saying it is any the worse for that—I am only saying that it is different. Its form is determined by Hindu thought and it might be described as cosmotheism, which I understand is the new word for pantheism (it is necessary to adopt new words now and then lest people find out the meaning of them). My own theology, by contrast, is pagan rather than vedantic, Greek rather than Hindu, and has never been able to absolve itself from the doctrine of immanence, that is, of absolute identity with the universe itself. But I may be wrong—and in any case there is nothing to quarrel about. Before the Unknown, Mr. Carpenter and I can uncover side by side, each adoring the All through the form determined by his own peculiar type of mind.

The Origin of Religions.

Let me now recall you to the fact that we set out to explore the origin of religion and that we found it in the general human consciousness. That general consciousness, however, we found to manifest the common feeling in different ways: It might be by the propitiation of nature spirits, that is spirits of the corn and the wild, of vegetation and earth and all its products; or it might be by Phallic rites connected with the mysteries of sex and reproduction; or by hero worship mounting into the worship of sun gods, turning the nightly heavens into a great religious scroll, especially the signs of the zodiac into myths of dazzling significance; or it might be the social consciousness developing the sense of a power that makes for righteousness. All these streams of thought and feeling took their rise at the same fount and origin in human nature, though it is impossible to decide the order of their coming forth, or to trace their course where they flow side by side. It is enough that they establish the unity of man, and that they will continue to flow more and more purely until they establish also the solidarity of man, which is not exactly the same thing. According to our

writer's prophetic mind: "They will all practically converge again in the end to one meaning, and prepare the way for one great synthesis to come—an evolution also necessary and inevitable in human psychology." And it is this development into the universal consciousness which shall bring humanity to the realization of its unity, that man shall find his salvation.

The Beginnings of Christianity.

Now, in the narrow margin of our remaining time I will do the best I can to present the substance of the two important chapters on the Genesis and Exodus of Christianity. I must rely upon the familiarity of my hearers with the subject which they have heard discussed before from this platform.

If we trace the Genesis of Christianity it appears plainly to be one of the later forms assumed by this single religious feeling as it developed through the ages. Christianity's claim to be a unique religion, specially revealed, and miraculously attested, can not be maintained. The real Genesis of Christianity was ages and ages before the year 1 A. D. The fact is plain that Christianity sprang from identically the one and same and only root as paganism, though, as Mr. Carpenter points out, its early adherents took great pains to cover up the tracks, even to the extent of destroying pagan books and records. He says: "The main Christian doctrines and festivals, besides a great mass of affiliated legend and ceremonial, are really quite directly derived from and related to preceding nature worships; and it has only been by a good deal of deliberate mystification and falsification that this derivation has been kept out of sight." It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Christianity took its doctrines and legends from Mythraism and its philosophy from Neo-Platonism. There was no harm in that—the harm was in denying it, and keeping up the denial to this day.

Hundreds and hundreds of years before the time of Jesus—in Egypt, Persia, India, Syria, Greece—all its great doctrines and creeds and symbols and festivals flourished. Sin, sacrifice, atonement, the cross, the crucified god, the grave, the resurrection and ascension, baptism, the lord's supper, the trinity, the saviour, rebirth and regeneration, Christmas, Easter, all were here centuries before the gifted Hellenistic Jew, Saul of Tarsus, created the religious composite shortly afterwards called and since then known as Christianity. Mr. Carpenter is of the opinion that in various respects the doctrines and legends were not improved by their passage into the new religion, while some were even narrowed and deteriorated—but let that pass.

For the discussion of the Jesus story one must go to the book itself, especially for its reference to other and more voluminous readings on the subject. The writer thinks it not necessary to suppose a human and visible founder for Christianity at all. As opposed to the historicity of Jesus, he leans to the legendary theory "for the simple reason that it seems much more encouraging to suppose that the story of Jesus is a myth which gradually formed itself in the consciousness of mankind, and thus points the way of humanity's future evolution, than to suppose it to be the mere record of a unique and miraculous interposition of providence which depended entirely upon the powers above, and could hardly be expected to occur again." Mr. Carpenter finds confirmation of his view in the close analogy between the Syrian Attis and the Christian Jesus, and in the fact that similar legends and rituals covered the entire Orient. A similar comparison destroys even the title of Christ. The word, Christ, both the title and the rites connected with it, were quite familiar in old Egypt, Babylon and Jewish Palestine.

The End of Christianity.

But enough. From this enormous accumulation of facts Mr. Carpenter infers the not distant Exodus of Christianity. His mind on this point is clear and his statement explicit. He thinks it neither probable nor desirable that Christianity should continue to hold the field. All that is true and good in it will, of course, survive; all that has contributed to the thought and character of mankind; but as a separate, distinct and professedly unique system it must yield to a larger synthesis. As it sprang out of the one world religion it must acknowledge its source and openly affiliate itself with the same or perish. It entered as a phase in the evolution of the world religion, and having fulfilled its mission it must yield before the promise of something better.

I wish it were possible to show at length how Mr. Carpenter reconciles the mind to this conclusion by a stern survey of the defects of Christian civilization; but you must go to the book itself for a statement of the case. Women and sex, asceticism and hypocrisy and prostitution and horrible disease, for one thing; for another thing, Commercialism, "endless sickness and crime, and sordid poverty, the crucifixion of animals in the name of science and of human workers in the name of wealth, and wars and horrors innumerable." Christianity and the civilization which accompanies it are of a piece and must pass away together. The romance and inspiration are out of them both. They have become worldly and vulgar beyond hope; and the preposterous and hideous conditions

they have issued in are surely drawing to an end before True Democracy and the New Order. Why should we retard a higher evolution of religion and civilization for the sake of a phrase which has had its day, which has permitted the world to come to the pass it stands in at this hour, and is manifestly incapable of effecting a rebirth? From pages of irrefutable indictment and prophecy, I conclude with a few quotations in justice to this judge of a passing age and prophet of a new one:

"On the one hand, no spiritual movement which does not take up the attitude of a world-religion has now in this age any chance of success. On the other all existing churches, whether Roman Catholic or Greek or Protestant or Secularist, will in all probability adopt the same blind and blinkered and selfish attitude as that described above, and so disqualify themselves for the great role of world-wide emancipation which some religion at some time will surely have to play. It is the same difficulty which is looming large in modern politics where the local selfishness and vainglorious patriotisms of the nations are sadly impeding and obstructing the development of that sense of internationalism and brotherhood which is the clearly indicated form of the future, and which alone can give each nation deliverance from fear, and a promise of growth, and the confident assurance of power."

The Need of Solidarity.

"The whole futile and idiotic structure of commerce and industry in which we are now imprisoned springs from that falsehood of individualistic self-seeking which marks the second stage of human evolution. That stage is already tottering to its fall, destroyed by the very flood of egotistic passions and interests, of vanities, greeds, and cruelties all warring with each other, which are the sure outcome and culmination of its operation. With the restoration of the sentiment of the Common Life, and the gradual growth of a mental attitude corresponding, there will emerge from the flood something like a solid earth—something on which it will be possible to build with good hope for the future. Schemes of reconstruction are well enough in their way, but if there is no ground of real human solidarity beneath, of what avail are they?

"The first condition of social happiness and prosperity must be in the sense of the Common Life. This sense, which instinctively underlay the whole tribal order of the far past, must in the end be the creative condition of a new order; it must provide the material of which the Golden City waits to be built. The long travail of the world religion will not have been in vain, which assures this consummation.

"Gradually out of an infinite mass of folly and delusion the human soul is disentangling itself, to emerge at length in the light of True Freedom. All the taboos, the insane terrors, the fatuous forbiddals of this and that, still linger, but ultimately Man will emerge from all these things Free—familiar with them all, but hampered and bound by none. He will realize the inner meaning of the creeds and rituals of the ancient religions, and will hail with joy the fulfillment of their far prophecy down the ages—finding after all the long expected Saviour of the world within his own breast, and Paradise in the disclosure there of the everlasting peace of the soul."

A Well-balanced Book.

[It is wonderfully refreshing to find so free and open-minded a discussion of the origin and development of religion. So many people who study this question are prejudiced either in one direction or the other. The Christian Church has kept itself severely apart from these speculations as, of course, representing a unique and divine revelation, little concerned with such heathenism; and it has managed to persuade the general public of its divine uniqueness to such a degree that few people realize that it has sprung from the same roots as paganism, and that it owes most of its doctrines and rites to the same source. The Christian Church has always taught that it is only foolish rationalists and infidels and unfashionable people who take any interest in sun-gods, and when a learned professor occasionally refers to magic as one of the sources of religion, it has always replied that he is speaking only of heathen religions and not of Christianity. On the other hand the rationalists have spoiled their case by assuming in their wrath against the church that all priests since the beginning of the world have been frauds and charlatans and that all the ceremonies of religion have been merely developed, devised and invented by them for the purpose of playing on the superstitions of the ignorant to their own enrichment. Thus they overleap themselves by grossly exaggerating a thing that no doubt is partially true. This book is so free from the prejudice of both the orthodox Christian and the orthodox rationalist, that I unhesitatingly recommend it as one of the greatest and finest studies of the subject that has ever been published and I trust that it will stimulate an interest in the origin and development of religion; for we will never be able to free ourselves from the horrible and weakening superstitions of popular religion until we know what religion is, and we can never know what religion is until we understand something of its beginnings and its course of development.]

